A NEW, MORE stringent building code in Memphis and elsewhere in the New Madrid fault zone might not pay off soon. The proposed new guidelines, however, would require an investment in additional reinforcement of new structures that could save an inestimable number of lives, in the immediate or distant future.

Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton and Shelby County Mayor A C Wharton are among local elected officials and builders who suggest further study before the enactment of seismic provisions in the proposed International Building Code of 2003. Mayors from across West Tennessee have joined an effort to generate more information about the costs and benefits of the provisions, which surely would be useful in this important decision-making process.

As Wharton notes, dollars that are applied to protection against earthquakes could otherwise be spent on education or health care. Supporting tough new seismic guidelines is a difficult stand for elected officials who must answer to taxpayers for costs that could discourage development, increase pressure to raise taxes and make less money available for public services that produce immediate and tangible results.

The decision rests with state officials who also must weigh the testimony of earthquake specialists who say the investment would certainly pay off. Experts say there is as much as a 10 percent chance that during the next half-century, the New Madrid fault zone will produce earthquakes of the same magnitude as the earthquakes of late 1811 and early 1812.

The kind of earthquakes that made the Mississippi River run backward in an era when the Mid-South was relatively undeveloped would be a catalyst for tragedy in an age of high-rise apartment buildings, hospitals, office towers and entertainment venues.

Officials made their case for delaying adoption of the new building code in a meeting last week with Tennessee Commerce and Insurance Commissioner Paula Flowers, who is the state fire marshal and oversees enforcement of building codes throughout Tennessee. Experts want to replace the Southern Standard Building Code of 1999, which includes seismic provisions that were last updated in the mid-1990s, with a proposed code that equates local earthquake risks with those of coastal California.

Recent studies indicate that catastrophic New Madrid earthquakes are likely to occur every 500 years. The Memphis Veterans Medical Center is undergoing a $100 million renovation that will add protection against the devastating effects such an earthquake could produce.

THAT KIND of expenditure on all public buildings is unquestionably out of the reach of local government resources. Proponents of the stricter guidelines, however, say improved reinforcement would add little to the cost of new buildings. Architects and developers disagree.

The ultimate decision on the seismic building code proposal must carefully weigh cost factors against what may be an inevitable encounter in the Mid-South with one of nature’s most destructive forces. Reliable information is crucial to the process.

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